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ABSTRACT

Writing instructors at the School of New Resources (SNR), a Bachelor of Arts degree program designed specifically for adults over 21, follow a student-centered philosophy marked by students' responsibility for and participation in their own learning through small, interactive seminars. English courses are infused with a sensitivity to the special needs of the adult student population. First, small classes of 15 to 20 students and a seminar format provide a supportive classroom atmosphere that invites student participation and resembles a writing workshop. Second, the writing instructors at SNR respect their students' life experience, encouraging them to write from the authority of these events and to apply their observations to the concepts found in academic texts. Third, educators take into account adult students' pragmatic orientation, and strive to establish a learning pattern that integrates long range goals with solutions to real life problems. In the writing classroom, students learn to employ the rhetorical stance of the authoritative speaker/writer and to speak in a public voice. Finally, SNR writing instructors employ positive feedback in the classroom to help students' learn and practice the conventions of standard written English within the context of their own writing and in an environment of peer cooperation. (JD)

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Teaching Writing to Academically Underprepared Adult Students: The School of New Resources Experience

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The School of New Resources (SNR) is a Bachelor of Arts degree program designed specifically for adults over 21. With 3300 students and six campuses, it is the largest of the four schools which comprise the College of New Rochelle. From its founding in 1972 SNR has been a leader in adult higher education. The academic program has been marked by students' responsibilty for and participation in their own learning through small, interactive seminars, individualized degree planning, and student-initiated development of new courses. SNR has always offered a variety of credit options in addition to classroom-based study: credit for prior learning, credit by exam, telecourses, independent studies, internships and travel/study

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courses. Such innovative features represent a continuous effort to serve the special needs and capitalize on the particular strengths of returning adult students.

Our history and the literature on adult learning highlight several key characteristics of this population:

1) Experience - Adults have not only more but different kinds of experience than younger students. Through work, travel, military service, marriage, parenthood, bereavement, divorce, and involvement in politics, community and church, adult students have accumulated an extensive store of experiences which they bring to the college classroom. Such students need both an opportunity to earn credits for learning acquired informally and an opportunity to test new learning against concepts and opinions derived from life experience.

2) Pragmatism - Adult learners need immediate possibilities for applying their knowledge. Malcolm Knowles (1978) describes their learning orientation as problem-centered rather than subject-centered. They want to know how each course, each segment of new learning, will advance their careers, help their communities, or improve their personal relationships, and thus they demand a shaping role in their curricula.

3) Motivation - Unlike high school students and even many 18-year-olds whose continuation onto college can hardly be considered a conscious choice among alternative paths, adult

students are voluntary learners. Returning to school after five, ten or twenty years is a major life decision for them, and they usually re-enter the classroom prepared for hard work and sacrifice. Adult students need opportunities to express that motivation through active participation in the classroom and by creating and directing independent learning projects.

4) Diversity - Adult education is multigenerational education, and diversity is often the most salient feature of an adult classroom. Diversity of prior experiences, of roles and responsibilities, of life phases, of physiological states, of social, emotional, moral and cognitive development, all point towards the need for a variety of learning options and for instructional approaches that do not attempt to push all students into a common mold.

The above characteristics are noted repeatedly by such key theorists of adult learning and development as Cattell (1971), Cross (1981), Kidd (1973), Knowles (1978), Knox (1977), and Levinson (1978). They represent a set of common assumptions underlying the design of many continuing education and alternative degree programs established in recent years specifically for returning adult students. These programs have generally served middle class students who already have some higher education. In fact, Patricia Cross (1978) argues that "At the present time, adult education is probably more elitist on socioeconomic indicators than today's undergraduate education...." She describes

the adults who participate in non-traditional programs of study as "disproportionately young, white, well-educated, employed in professional and technical occupations, and making good incomes" (p.4).

Socioeconomic descriptors are very different, however, for the adult students who attend the School of New Resources. In an effort to deepen our committment to providing quality education to traditionally bypassed populations, we have expanded into the poor and minority communities of New York City. Our sites include campuses in the South Bronx and Bedford-Stuyvesant and an extension center in Harlem. Many of our students come from neighborhoods and streets where unemployment, underemployment, crime and despair constitute the realities of day-to-day life.

The statistics on our student population present a very different profile from most adult higher education programs. Today the typical SNR student -- let us call her Yolanda -- is a 35-year-old, Black female graduate of New York City public schools. She is a single parent with young children and works full time in a low-paying job. Yolanda is distinguished from traditional college students not only by age but by race, class, family situation and educational background. The schools she attended were marked by physical decay, overcrowding, violence, staff and faculty cynicism, pervasively low expectations, and appalling truancy and dropout rates. Little wonder then that Yolanda's literacy and other academic skills are initially weak

and that her prior school experiences are a source of some embarrassment and frustration. She returns to school with a combination of hope and uncertainty -- hope that a college degree will improve her life and uncertainty about her ability to succeed in an academic program.

What we as an institution have learned in recent years is that a degree program which serves students like Yolanda must attend to the distinctive needs both of adult students and of academically underprepared students. We continue to regard the life experience, pragmatism and motivation of students like Yolanda as resources upon which to build a successful and meaningful college education, but we have refined our understanding of how and when such students can achieve effective partnership in academic planning. We now regard the ability to make informed curricular choices and conduct self-directed learning projects as the desired outcome of a developmental process which focuses on skills consolidation, self-assessment (i.e. identification of abilities, knowledge and interests), and exposure to the discourse and behavior conventions of the academic community. For the first several semesters SNR students concentrate on completing degree requirements through introductory-level coursework. Having completed these courses, which include training in individualized degree planning, course development and independent learning, students have effective control over their choice of an area of concentration

and over the distribution of approximately fifty elective credits. They also have the option to include up to thirty credits of independent study projects and to seek up to thirty more credits for prior learning.

The development of college-level language proficiency is a central aspect of those first semesters, and I would like to turn my attention now to what happens in our writing courses. While the structure of students' lower-level coursework has become more traditional than in the early years of our program, curriculum and instruction in English as in all subject areas continue to be infused by sensitivity to the special needs of this student population. This sensitivity is manifested in a supportive classroom atmosphere, respect for students' experience, understanding of their pragmatic orientation and concern to deepen and reinforce their motivation.

Supportive Classroom Atmosphere - We are fortunate in that our founding philosophy assumed students' need to actively participate in classroom learning. This dictated small class size (usually 15 to 20) and a seminar rather than lecture format in all subject areas. Our faculty, most of whom are part-time instructors, generally function as facilitators of learning rather than as authority figures. They encourage an informal, friendly atmosphere in the classroom and invite students to take the role of co-inquirers into the central problems and tasks posed in the various disciplines. Such an institutional

environment is conducive to turning writing courses into writing workshops. The trust and intimacy which students need when they read their writing to each other are qualities we value throughout the curriculum, and Peter Elbow's notion (1981) of writing as a gift to be shared seems quite appropriate to us. We also realize that new and uncertain students need to talk their way through such unfamiliar problems as writing narrative or expository essays. A supportive classroom environment allows them to articulate their understanding or misunderstanding of writing assignments, to plan their writing aloud (e.g. by trying out alternative thesis formulations or describing how they might support their viewpoint) and to talk about both their writing and their self-perceptions as writers.

Respect for Students' Experience - As teachers we begin with positive assumptions about our students' ability to learn. While there are many things which beginning SNR students do not know and cannot do, they also bring real strengths and aptitudes upon which to build. Students like Yolanda who attend college two or three nights a week despite the enormous pressures of family, work and community responsibilities and despite the chronic health problems of the poor show an admirable strength of character and a determination to attain their educational and life goals. Although such students may as yet be untrained as scholars and unfamiliar with the master works of literature, philosophy and art, they have had significant,

even profound, human experiences and will use the perspectives shaped by their experiences as the lens through which new events, new facts, new ideas are filtered and evaluated. In writing classes this means that they must be given opportunities to write from the authority of their own life experiences, and, in fact, our first college composition course is titled "Translating Experience Into Essay." Our students learn the patterns and conventions of academic discourse and the vocabularies of academic disciplines, but this is done most effectively when these conventions and concepts are perceived as ways to critically interpret the realities of the world they already know. As Paulo Freire (1970) writes, "To exist humanly is to name the world, to change it.... But while to say the true word... is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few men, but the right of every man" (p.76).

Viewed in this way, the shift from narration to exposition and research paper writing for example, does not mean discarding the first-person viewpoint in favor of the pseudo-objectivity of the third person or simply replacing personal knowledge with book knowledge. Rather it means reflecting on and generalizing from the details of experience and connecting these generalizations with the concepts and propositions found in academic and other texts.

Understanding of Students' Pragmatic Orientation - Schaie

(1974) maintains that adults manifest a learning pattern which integrates long-range goals with the solution of real life problems. The driving force for many of our students is a sense of responsibility to improve family and community life. A majority of our graduates go into teaching or social work. We must take account of their goals as we plan the tasks they must perform in academic courses. Writing teachers are challenged to help students find both extrinsic and intrinsic rationales for their assignments and class activities. Extrinsic rationales follow from the importance of certain prose conventions and of standard English usage in the rest of their coursework as well as in their future professions. Intrinsic rationales are those which students find as they struggle with writing tasks and find a topic or approach which genuinely engages them. This suggests a need for students to choose or at least determine the final shape of their writing assignments. There is a further implication for students who are radically alienated from the sources of wealth, status and prestige. They must try out and eventually become comfortable speaking and writing in a public voice, one which presumes authority over a broad and impersonal audience, an authority which typically portrays some learning process as the result of which the writer has gained knowledge or insight which demands the attention of others. To learn to employ this rhetorical stance of the authoritative speaker/ writer is a great accomplishment for someone whose social world

has thus far been bounded by the authority of others.

Concern for Motivation - Although it may seem platitudinous to cite the importance of motivation, this factor cannot be overstressed for either returning adult students or academically underprepared students. Many traditional programs which focus exclusively on students' deficits and ignore their abilities kill their motivation in the first semester or two. We believe that our students' initial motivation can be deepened by positive feedback. This does not mean ignoring grammatical errors, syntactical derailments or rhetorically ineffective passages, but it does mean identifying those things which students do well in writing and reading their papers as real communication, not as mere practice in error avoidance. Thus, even in our most basic writing courses we help students compose whole pieces of discourse and then learn and practice the conventions of standard written English within the context of their own writing. Another essential source of positive reinforcement is peer collaboration. Whether it be in reading and response groups or peer editing activities, our students show a cooperative and mutually supportive attitide which is a refreshing contrast to the competitive individualism which so often marks traditional academic endeavor.

Let me end with a qualifying note. I apologize if I appear to simply be singing a paean of institutional self-congratulation. There are many problems that I could describe, many examples of

ill-conceived, ineffective teaching that I could recount. What I have chosen to focus on is the best practice of writing and other teachers at the School of New Resources, and I speak from the authority of having observed more than 100 classes in my four years at the School. I also want to suggest the advantage an institution has when it begins with a student-centered philosophy and tries to understand the particular characteristics and needs of its students. Such an institutional philosophy can facilitate the creation of an environment which supports and encourages the best instincts of teaching faculty and challenges students to be involved in their own learning.

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